



Building a Districtwide Character Education Initiative

The role of the district in facilitating the development of caring school communities cannot be overstated. The bulk of responsibility for implementing character education may be carried by the school, but the planning, encouragement, and drive must originate in the district's central office. Most importantly, the district communicates beliefs and sets expectations for the character effort. Namely, that good character can and should be taught, and that every school in the district will consciously build a school climate of positive character and ethical behavior.

The following principles are designed to help districts establish strong character education programs in all schools. Together, these principles make clear the role of the district's central office in facilitating the ethical development of all stakeholders. Following each of the principles are strategies that, when followed, guarantee a strong character education framework for the district, one that supports the initiatives of its schools and ultimately improves the lives of students.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 1

Character education requires deliberate planning and implementation.

Psychologist and author Thomas Lickona describes character education as “the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue.” The key word is deliberate. We should not assume that children, left to their own accords, will grow and become young adults of good character. Clearly, children need adults to teach them through example and exhortation. With this in mind, we must acknowledge that schools have a critical role to play in the development of the ethical

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sensibilities of their students. We cannot take the place of parents, nor should we try. However, in the best situations we can reinforce what caring, ethically sensitive parents are trying to instill in their children. In other cases, we can help children forge an ethical conscience that will help them make good decisions and understand how to “do the right thing.” In other words, for some students, the stakeholders of the school must serve as the moral compass.

If we accept that this is true, then we must take seriously the role the school must play in the formation of students’ character. To examine it in another light, students spend more than 180 days a year, seven to ten hours a day in school. To state that the school must not play a critical role in the social and ethical development of students argues against reality. We are going to influence the social and ethical development of children. The only question is: Will our efforts be positive or negative? With consciousness of our character education goals, and with solid planning and implementation, we can succeed in positively shaping the ethical and social nature of our students. Helping facilitate and support schoolwide planning and development falls upon the district office and its representative. The support of the district office sends a clear message that character education is important on a district as well as a school level.

Principle 1 Strategies

- Encourage schools to make character education part of the “ethos” or life of the school.
- Have schools submit character education plans for the current year. See how these plans fit with the three-year district plan called for in District Principle 3.
- Visit schools and, if needed, help with the planning process. Help schools set dates and schedules for implementation.
- Encourage all participants in public meetings to model and exhibit civility.
- Encourage schools to celebrate and recognize ethical exemplars.
- Ensure staff meetings are civil in nature, with adults treating each other the way they would like to be treated.
- Plan networking activities at which all school staffs can talk and plan how they will implement character education throughout the curriculum.
- Develop a districtwide sportsmanship award for schools and teams that exhibit good sportsmanship in athletics.
- Support coaches in making sportsmanship a priority in all events.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 2

A district office committee directs the districtwide character education initiative.

Most Maryland schools already operate some kind of character education initiative. Strong district leadership can make the difference between barely adequate initiatives and initiatives that transform schools and bolster achievement. Districts with strong character education programs are typically guided by a central office committee with a strong leader who provides support for individual schools. This committee, and ultimately its leader, is fully invested in the drive to build caring and responsible school communities.

Schools are given academic and curricular mandates. The same focus and

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attention should be extended to character education. With district office expectations spurring action in individual schools, the programs can reach new heights of success and achievement. Creating a district office committee that consists of stakeholders from the schools as well as the community will create a unified vision to guide individual schools and communities in their efforts to improve the social and ethical climate of all within their schools.

Principle 2 Strategies

- Identify key school staff and community stakeholders to serve on the district office committee. Consider representatives from central office staff and administration, school staffs and administration, businesses, community agencies, parents, and students.
- Ask committee members for a minimum three-year commitment to allow for continuity of program design and management.
- Charge the committee with:
 - crafting realistic goals, strategies, and guidelines for successful implementation of a comprehensive character education program in every school. A comprehensive program includes curriculum, planning strategies, evaluation strategies, and recognition opportunities.
 - reviewing current character education research and trends and communicating them to schools regularly.
 - exploring character education grants and resources to help fund school initiatives.
 - sharing character education mandates with school teams regularly to emphasize the district’s commitment to character education.
 - ensuring professional development opportunities for schools.
 - monitoring school-level implementation of the committee’s recommendations through school-level action plans that set achievable, timely goals.
- Each committee member should conduct at least one site visit per year to observe the character education practices within a school for the purposes of evaluation and future planning. Each school should be visited at least once.

Theory into Practice

The Carroll County school district's Character Education Committee involves character education coordinators from every school as well as district office representatives. Parents are invited and attend meetings, and students participate in reporting their schools' character efforts to the committee. Since 1996, this district committee has been working to keep Carroll County's character education initiative innovative and effective. The committee is led by the district-level character education and service-learning coordinators. The committee meets two to four times a year and provides school-based professionals time to network and share the important work they do in their schools to create a positive school climate. The committee's objectives for the 2006-07 school year were to examine school discipline data and develop action plans to address trends in student behavior and achievement.

Students present to the committee the character education efforts in their schools and the impact the programs have had. Committee members have a chance to ask the students and advisors questions to further clarify components of the program; this allows the committee to garner more activities to share districtwide. For example, at the Carroll County Character Education Committee's fall meeting, several Liberty High School students and their advisor presented the SPIRIT Project, a character education program with a multicultural focus. Also discussed at this meeting were the Carroll County Best Practices Regarding Discipline.

In Frederick County, a district-level Character Council was created as a collaboration among the schools, city and county governments, YMCA, and others. Meeting monthly, the Character Council has been active since the Character Counts! program was established districtwide in 1996. The Character Council also sponsors two annual character events—a Character Awards Gala and an Ethics Seminar. Both of these events occur within the community and are supported by the schools and local businesses.

Frederick County has also established a Character Coordinators Committee that meets twice a year to share best practices and learn about research and new initiatives in the field of character education. Led by the district-level character education coordinator, this

committee is composed of a character coordinator from each school in the district. During meetings, members discuss effective strategies from across the nation as well as effective implementation of their own strategies. Speakers from the Maryland State Department of Education and other organizations present best practices and current research to this committee.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 3

A district character education action plan defines the goals and objectives of the district's character education initiative.

There is an old saying, "Now that we have lost sight of our goals, we must redouble our effort." Staff time, instructional time, and other resources are too precious to be used haphazardly. A successful character education initiative is a carefully planned initiative; it reflects districtwide goals, but is also tailored to encompass the needs of each school's stakeholders.

By developing three-year action plans, districts can help school improvement teams plan character education initiatives that address

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student needs as well as districtwide goals and priorities. The action plans should support and guide school improvement teams' efforts to infuse character development within the "ethos" or life of the school. The action plans should also contain guidelines that reflect district goals for enhancing the social, ethical, and learning

environment within each school. These guidelines should provide a framework, but not a formula. Each school has different strengths and needs, and will need a slightly different approach.

Another critical component of the action plan is the three-year timeline, which will give schools the time needed to bring about meaningful changes in the social and ethical climate. It takes time to develop character-related instructional units tied to the standard course of study. It also takes time to engage the building and community stakeholders and involve them in planning. Put simply,

anything worth doing well is worth doing with consideration and reflection.

To ensure every school is working to enhance its character-building process, districts should require schools to report annually on progress and efforts. In the reports, schools should explain their efforts and include qualitative and quantitative results that indicate the success of the initiative.

Principle 3 Strategies

- Appoint a lead person at the district level who desires to facilitate a districtwide character education initiative. This person should take the lead in the development of the district character education initiative as well as supporting individual schools' efforts.
- Form a district team, including community stakeholders, to develop guidelines that will facilitate school improvement teams' character-building processes. (See District Principle 2.)
- Share current research on character education with the district team to further understanding of what constitutes an effective character education program.
- Design a three-year action plan with guidelines to help facilitate a more comprehensive character development plan for each school.
- Bring in outside experts as needed to evaluate and facilitate the development of the guidelines.
- Assign an individual at the district level the responsibility of assessing and facilitating the schools' character education action plans.
- Keep a district-level "character notebook" that indicates how the district character education plan is working within the established guidelines to achieve the established goals. Include relevant data such as attendance rates, honor roll numbers, suspensions, etc. Include a review of school-level progress and efforts during principals' evaluations.
- Develop a district-level plan for supporting character education in schools. The plan should include all district departments and specify how each will support the schools. Some of these departments might include instruction, athletics, school guidance and counseling, and health services.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 4

The district and its schools base character education initiatives on data.

To be successful, a character education initiative must meet the needs of its community and work in concert with the district's Master Plan. Since character education is data-driven, each district should use needs assessments and other relevant measures to customize a

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character education initiative that encompasses all of the district's geographical and economic areas. Districts should consider data-gathering sources such as districtwide surveys, school self assessments, school discipline data, and feedback or evaluation forms. Because a district's focus sets the tone for all schools, district support personnel should assist in the data-gathering process and

demonstrate a commitment to helping schools develop data that provides a good indication of their social and ethical climates. Everyone must agree that needs assessments, climate surveys, and other measures produce important data that drives school improvement planning—it is more than just “nice to know” information.

Once the data has been gathered, the district must support schools' efforts to analyze data and make data-based decisions, including crafting or revising a school character education action plan. The district action plan should emphasize what is working and in what areas improvement is needed. It should also reflect the individual district's demographics and be revised as appropriate when there are changes in the student population. Results from statewide tests like the Maryland School Assessment, or other measures of student achievement, should also be considered when creating or revising a district character education action plan.

Principle 4 Strategies

- Conduct a districtwide needs assessment that includes the views of the central office staff, school staff, students, parents, and community groups.
- Supply schools appropriate surveys that will provide insight on each school as a caring learning community. Direct each school to:
 - analyze its data (attendance, discipline, bullying data, climate, etc.) and identify needs.
 - complete a self-assessment tool that prompts school staff to reflect on current practices, identify objectives, and develop, improve, or update a strategic plan.
 - analyze its monthly discipline data and revise its character initiatives as needed.
 - share schoolwide discipline data with the school improvement team and/or the entire faculty.
 - administer an ongoing perception survey that encourages feedback from stakeholders. These surveys should measure the perceptions of visitors, faculty, and students following school-sponsored events.
 - maintain, if possible, the same survey over time to build a consistent reporting format. For example, a school might survey faculty, students, and parents annually. This would allow the school to see improvement (or lack thereof) over a period of time.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 5

The district office and schools share a common character language.

To be understood, we must speak the same language as our intended audience. In the same way, speaking a common character language districtwide builds a common understanding among all schools and stakeholders. Both children and adults need to understand school and district expectations for character, and what the character traits look like in daily life. Having a common language also promotes

shared values in the school and community. To facilitate this, the common character language should be shared with the larger school community, such as area businesses, government agencies, and faith-

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When a common character language is guiding the efforts of each school, students benefit from the consistency. For example, a number of Maryland's school districts have large numbers of students transferring among schools during the school year. Having a common character language throughout the district eases transitions for students because expectations are similar among schools.

Every voice matters when the district is developing its character language. Using a consensus-building process, districts and stakeholders should identify and define character traits to establish a common language that will allow the system to work toward shared goals.

Principle 5 Strategies

- Direct the district's character committee to collect input on the character language from stakeholders, such as students, school professionals, parents, community members/business partners, and central office staff.
- Once a comprehensive list of character traits and virtues is established, direct the committee to distill the list into essential traits and virtues that are key to the goals of the character education program and the district. Conduct this winnowing process collaboratively. The process of developing a common language can be a slow one and should be a thoughtful one. Do not fear using a dictionary to break gridlock in defining character traits!
- Staff development should support the use of the character language.
- Ask individual schools to include the common character language in school improvement plans and action plans.

- Embed the common character language in the district's vision, mission, and goal statements; display the statements in a visible location, such as the district Web site.
- Communicate regularly to district and school staffs that the common language of good character is in both word and deed. Our words and actions must closely resemble the agreed upon expectations established districtwide.
- Orient new employees to the district's character education initiative upon hiring. Based on interactions with human resources and other district personnel, new hires should have a feel for the district's language even before they enter the school.

Theory into Practice

One way St. Mary's County Public Schools ensures a common character language is incorporating character traits into the discipline policy that all schools follow. The district's goal was to prevent and reduce discipline problems by pairing positive character traits with specific code violations and disciplinary actions.

The district encourages schools to teach character traits to help students learn to make good, ethical decisions. In fact, the St. Mary's Public Schools' official calendar states that "Character building is most effective when a school regularly utilizes the opportunity to strengthen awareness of positive choices. This improves a student's ability to foresee potential consequences, devise options, and implement principled choices." Within district guidelines, each school's administration has established its own specific character-building interventions to enhance the total education program. When an infraction occurs, administrators can review appropriate character traits with the student.

In the St. Mary's County Public Schools calendar, behavior violations are matched to more appropriate choices that illustrate good character. For example, caring is provided as the alternative to fighting, defamation, and harassment. Citizenship is the alternative to truancy, vandalism, weapons, and possession of drugs and alcohol. Fairness is the alternative to extortion, while respect is encouraged over insubordination, sexual activity, and bullying. Responsibility is the choice encouraged

over bus misbehavior and dress code violations. Trustworthiness is the alternative to academic dishonesty. In this manner, all infractions are paired with a positive, character-based choice.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 6

The district Master Plan includes the character education initiative.

“We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.” Martin Luther King Jr.’s wise words articulate two great goals of education: to help children learn, and to help shape their character. Historically character formation has been a mission of the American Common School. To reach this noble goal in our present time, we must work to ensure that character education is treated as seriously as academic programs in school districts. To do so, character education must

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pervade all aspects of system operations and influence the schools’ cultures.

Indeed the argument can be made that programs are most effective and enduring when a comprehensive approach is used by those seeking to develop civic virtue and character in our youth.

In Maryland, the district Master Plan is used to coordinate system goals and serves as a roadmap for improving academic achievement and the safe operation of schools. Character education is prominent in school system Master

Plans, and is coordinated with other school and community-based programs, as a strategy to support the goal for a safe and orderly environment. The inclusion of character education in district Master Plans indicates that character education is an essential element of successful schools because it helps reduce negative student behavior, improve academic performance, and prepare students to be responsible citizens. Additionally, the inclusion of character education indicates that the district will provide support and leadership in this effort.

Principle 6 Strategies

- Evaluate districtwide data regarding the social and ethical climate of schools. Data can be pulled from suspension and expulsion reports, student and staff attendance rates, climate surveys, and qualitative reports generated from interviews with students and school staff. Based on this data, note strengths and weaknesses of the district and individual schools.
- Working with district and community representatives, develop a general statement in the Master Plan that establishes, using data, the need for intentional character development as part of the district's goals and schools' improvement plans.
- Develop a committee, with central office and community representatives, to establish general guidelines schools should consider in developing their individual plans for enhancing the character education of all stakeholders in school buildings.
- Make sure that the district character education plan is not looked upon as another "add-on" program. Character education must be built into the daily life of the schools and the district office.
- The district Master Plan should state an intention to provide trainings and support for schools that are working to develop comprehensive character education plans.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 7

The district character committee and the district character coordinator work with individual schools to ensure character education develops and grows.

Character education is not just for a few schools in a district. The social and ethical development of all stakeholders has relevance for every school. All schools should be involved. The presence of character education in all schools demonstrates that it is a priority for the district and sets high expectations for staff, students, and other stakeholders at the school level.

Character education must involve the whole community, and each school is a vital link in that effort. The school community involves the building staff, students, parents, and community

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members, all of whom make up a core group in implementing character education. An important advantage of involving each school is the consistent effort in character education seen and felt throughout the district. This consistency is possible only when staff and parents throughout the district are on the same page, speaking the same character language, sharing strategies, and celebrating successes. Simply requiring

schools to implement character initiatives is, of course, not enough. The district must provide each school a framework to use for consistency and support. The action steps below, combined with the other recommendations in this section, provide such a framework.

Principle 7 Strategies

- Build explicit support for character education at the district level. Successful school building efforts are reinforced by top-down support, from the superintendent, to supervisors, to school principals.
- Designate a character education contact at each school to facilitate communication, attend district meetings, and share information with the school community. This contact may be the person responsible for heading the building's character education efforts, or a different person, which would reinforce that character education is a team effort that belongs to everyone.
- Support each school in forming a character education committee made up of staff, parents, and students. This committee will serve as a core group to advise and facilitate the building's character education efforts.

- Designate the district personnel to be responsible for arranging regular meetings at which school building contacts share their progress and strategies. The networking and support that school personnel receive from these meetings will help them maintain the initiatives in their own schools.
- As the character education initiative follows logically from the district Master Plan, ensure that character education is included in each school improvement plan.
- Ensure character education initiatives are based on individual school needs assessments and relevant data and are consistent with the district's goals and Master Plan.
- Support schools' efforts by providing them sufficient funding and time to implement character education initiatives.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 8

The district office coordinates regular staff development in character education for school and district staff.

The success of any educational initiative hinges upon the capacity of staff to make it happen. Character education is no different. District and school staffs need to be involved in and thoroughly understand the district's character education initiative, the school's character education initiative and action plan, and the expectations for individual students. As facilitators of character education, school and district staffs must also have access to quality staff development that includes research-based strategies to enhance the social and ethical development of all stakeholders in the school system.

Staff development should be aligned with the learning priorities and outcomes of the district, and focused on creating classrooms and schools where character development is treated as seriously as the academic goals of the school. Indeed, the better the social climate of the school, the greater the chance of meeting the

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academic goals. Character educators must also learn how to establish school routines to enhance the social climate, how to incorporate lessons on social and ethical issues into the curriculum, and how to inspire all stakeholders to assume their roles in creating schools that develop ethical exemplars. Additional topics might include: how to teach expectations regarding character; ways to recognize those character traits that emulate the vision of the school and district; funding and otherwise supporting character education initiatives; building school capacity to lead initiatives and inspire learners; motivating the school faculty; building a common set of character traits and language; and enriching a curriculum with character education. Furthermore, in order to be useful to teachers, staff, and administrators, professional development must relate to the needs of the schools and classrooms.

Principle 8 Strategies

- Make character education a priority in staff development planning and in continuing education course planning.
- Assess the needs of staff districtwide to determine appropriate areas of training.
- Use strengths within the system: staff from schools that have been recognized for outstanding work in character education.
- If it is not possible to train entire staffs, then train a representative from each school who will then return to the school and train colleagues.
- Establish a districtwide clearing house for the distribution of character education materials and information.
- Clearly communicate the district's priorities to all staff, every year.
- Align character education staff development to the district's learning priorities.
- Include opportunities for professional development throughout the school year.
- Consider establishing mentoring relationships among staff. Perhaps an experienced character educator mentors a new teacher.

- Provide staff with progressive professional development to assure common knowledge on the basics of character education. Differentiate for staff with more or less knowledge or experience.
- Provide staff and schools with resources and training to integrate character education into schools.
- To assure proper implementation, conduct follow-up visits and observations. These may include classroom and school visits, mentoring, coaching, and reflection.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 9

Sufficient, continued district funding makes school character education initiatives possible.

Funding is an important factor to consider when looking at the state of character education in Maryland's public schools. The great majority of money spent in education is focused on enhancing the intellectual development of our youth. Who can argue with this? We all want smart children who will be able to compete in a world market. Yet we also need students and adults who are ethical in their treatment of others. This will not occur by happenstance. It requires effort and insight to facilitate this development. It also requires money. Adults need to be trained in best strategies and encouraged to share their knowledge locally as well as at state, regional, or national conferences. Providing schools adequate resources—including funding and time—plays an important role in facilitating social, ethical, and hopefully academic success for the individual student, the school, and the school district. Therefore, it just makes sense for districts to change attitudes about funding—moving character education funding from a luxury to a necessity.

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Principle 9 Strategies

- Provide character education funds in amounts that can help schools fulfill their character goals.
- Pursue character education grants, including those from federal, state, local, and private sources.
- Direct funds to support professional development at the district and school levels. This should include money to hire speakers and researchers who can help train staff and generate ideas for character education activities.
- Consider using funds from the various “Title” grants. For example, Title 1 requires that some funds be spent on staff development. Improving climate helps improve learning in the school.
- Support the visits of school staffs to exemplary schools throughout the state. This may be a very inexpensive way to greatly enhance the knowledge of staff.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 10

The district office ensures district-level and school staffs have the time they need to implement character education initiatives.

Time is a precious commodity. This is more true today, in this era of school accountability, than ever. There is a curriculum to be taught, standards to be met, academic remediation to be done, and, it seems, never enough time to do it. But districts must

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remember, and must communicate to schools, that time spent on character education is not time lost on academics. One supports the other. Districts must make time for character education—at the district level and in schools.

To be effective, character education initiatives need to be built into the everyday life, or “ethos,” of the school. This is not always a natural occurrence for educators. Therefore, we must take time to train the adult stakeholders in the building as well as give them time to reflect and begin implementation.

Of crucial importance is making sure schools do not “bite off more than they can chew.” In other words, a steady effort over several years will result in more success than attempting a total change, at one time, in the instructional and social patterns of a school. Regular time to think and reflect on best strategies should be a part of every school’s environment.

Principle 10 Strategies

- Create district and school committees to create classroom lesson plans tied to the curriculum. Lessons can be delivered daily, weekly, or monthly. These may be used as a special focus for the school.
- Explicitly direct principals to support character education in their buildings and participate in creating and implementing initiatives. Principals that take a hands-on approach to creating an initiative will get more support from the staff members who are putting it in place. Use faculty meetings and team planning time to assess and consider the best way to focus efforts in character education.
- Use data from perception surveys and other sources to build a case for more time for character education; present the case to the local board of education and other policymakers and stakeholders.
- Encourage school-level staff to become role models of positive interactions. This way, good character is modeled throughout the school day, and no “extra” time is required.
- Monthly or several times a year, devote a block of time for entire schools to focus on character education. This is a powerful demonstration of district commitment to character education, and it will resonate with schools.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 11

Curriculum coordinators identify connections to character education, or “teachable moments,” in their subject matter.

Schools should focus on teaching character within the regular curriculum. Indeed, whether one is teaching physical education, music, art, English, history, or science, there are ample opportunities to have students reflect on the social and ethical issues contained within the curriculum. There are also “teachable moments” that arise

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within the life of the school that can facilitate wonderful discussions. District staff should review the national and state standards that drive the local curriculums. Working either individually or with a committee, they

should seek to illustrate opportunities for discussions and teaching about issues of social and ethical importance. In some districts, committees have reviewed their standard courses of study and determined where their character-building efforts most logically fit into the curriculum. In this manner, the classroom teachers are given support and, in some cases, lesson plans to facilitate their efforts.

Principle 11 Strategies

- Direct the district’s curriculum coordinators to review the curriculum and identify connections to character. They may also want to do a Web search to see what other states have done. For example, North Carolina has provided lesson plans for teachers on infusing character into the regular curriculum. These are available through the Department of Public Instruction’s Web site at www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/charactereducation/handbook/content2/pdf.
- Identify opportunities in the curriculum to engage students and ask them to share experiences. For example, in a history class students may reflect on racial stereotyping and how character is affected. Or in a biology class, discuss respect, responsibility, and appropriate behavior when dissecting animals.

- Consider establishing a Web site where teachers can upload and share lesson plans.
- Consider a time after school when teachers can come together and share their lessons.
- Some publishers are including character lessons in their text books. Encourage teachers to look for recommendations on how the textbook authors believe lessons in character can be taught within the curriculum.
- Encourage coaches to share how they work to develop sportsmanship with their athletes.
- Encourage staff to share strategies for infusing character into the curriculum during team meetings and shared planning time.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 12

Service-learning connects with character education at the district level.

Service-learning should be a natural extension of character education practices at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Service-learning extends what we teach about character and puts it into action. It's one thing to know what is the right thing to do; it is another thing to do it. Service-learning, and students' subsequent reflection on their efforts, provides all students the chance to actively participate and grow in understanding the importance of assisting others as a tool to crafting a life of noble purpose.

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As Maryland has a service-learning graduation requirement, many districts already have service-learning experiences embedded in their curriculum. If it isn't already, service-learning should be incorporated into the district's Master Plan and viewed as an important component of the academic and character development process. As service-learning develops within districts, it becomes the foundation for why we teach character. The next step, then, is for districts to intentionally link service-learning to the development of character. In conclusion, school districts that support

school staffs' efforts to help students make connections among academics, character development, and service have a greater chance of educating students and adults who "know, love and do the good."

Principle 12 Strategies

- Align service-learning opportunities with district and school character initiatives.
- Invite the district service-learning coordinator/specialist to join the district character education committee.
- Identify a service-learning specialist from the district's character education committee to provide assistance to schools as they plan service-learning opportunities for students.
- Provide training for school-based service-learning coordinators on the connections between service-learning and character education.
- Develop and align character education and service-learning staff development opportunities.
- Develop a working database of service-learning resources and ideas, infused with character education, for school professionals who coordinate school-based experiences.
- Connect with nonprofit organizations; they can serve as valuable starting points to launch character education and service-learning opportunities. For example, create a list of civil service speakers to talk with children about what their agencies do for citizens.
- Make sure service-learning infused instructional units illustrate links to character education.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 13

The positive behavior initiative incorporates character education.

An increasing number of Maryland schools have adopted a positive behavior initiative, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) process. A positive behavior reinforcement process has a direct connection with the character education process. As does

character education, a positive behavior initiative advocates the explicit teaching of virtues and behavioral expectations. A school with a positive behavior initiative is focused on helping students develop habits of civility in their classrooms, throughout the building, and hopefully in the community. District leadership must recognize that a positive behavior initiative meshes with the establishment of consistent rules and practices designed to foster school civility.

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Therefore, it is essential that districts encourage schools to adopt some type of positive behavior initiative that will bolster the character education effort, thereby supporting a safe and orderly school environment that enhances academic achievement.

Principle 13 Strategies

- Include a positive behavior initiative in the district's Master Plan.
- Direct schools to include a positive behavior initiative in school improvement plans.
- Secure funding from various sources (local, federal, state, community) for school teams to receive initial or ongoing training in a positive behavior initiative/process such as PBIS.
- On the district level, make sure that schools understand that the establishment of consistent practices designed to build respect and responsibility is necessary, but not sufficient, to provide a comprehensive character education initiative.
- Create a handout on the desired character virtues and expected behaviors based on those found in the district's behavioral policy. This can guide individual schools.
- Encourage each school's administrative team to insure that the positive behavior initiative team and character education team, if they are separate, are working together toward the development of ethically and socially competent individuals.
- Encourage each school to adopt a code of conduct based on its students' needs and display it throughout the building.
- Encourage each school to post and share consequences for students who do not comply with the code of conduct.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 14

Parent involvement strengthens the district's character initiative.

In terms of ethical and character development, parents have the most influence on children. Therefore, parent involvement must be at the forefront of initiatives supporting character education. Their involvement is essential to both district and school efforts. What

Indeed, no program of character education can be sustained without some support from the home.

does such involvement look like? Parents might serve on character education councils and district-level advisory boards; participate in forums; serve as trainers and peer mentors in parenting programs; assist in the design and implementation of character education programs; and volunteer alongside their

children in service-learning activities. Creating home-school partnerships will inevitably improve relationships among community members and strengthen the character development of children. Indeed, no program of character education can be sustained without some support from the home.

Principle 14 Strategies

- Advertise annually for parent volunteers on character committees and for other collaborative efforts.
- Involve parents in developing character education action plans and initiatives.
- Provide workshops for parents throughout the district, taking care to address the diversity of languages, times, and locations parents may need.
- Work with parent-teacher organizations and other community organizations to strengthen community-family bonds.
- Share the district's initiatives with parents several times each year using multiple communication methods, e.g., newsletters, Web, e-mail, or a community television channel.

- Continually help schools recruit parents in the effort to improve school climate, reinforce school goals, and sustain growth in the ethical development of their children. Schools should invite families into the school for events, activities, and meetings.
- Share with all families the character traits emphasized by the district and school along with activities they can use at home.
- Encourage schools to initiate discussions with families about character education materials and to always be open to parents' suggestions.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 15

A districtwide character education newsletter highlights effective strategies and successful schools.

After providing organization and support for schools and communities in their character-building effort, it is important for the district to maintain communication to school stakeholders regarding best practices in building character-developing schools. A districtwide newsletter is an efficient, effective way

to help develop such a learning community. The newsletter's emphasis should be on the most current character education research as well as proven character implementation strategies. The research and strategies should reinforce the district's Master Plan and help

schools with new character education initiatives as well as schools with more advanced initiatives. Besides featuring the best in research studies on promising strategies, a section of the newsletter should also feature lessons from the schools. In this manner, research informs practice, but good practice also validates research. Both are important in furthering the district's initiative.

The newsletter's emphasis should be on the most current character education research as well as proven character implementation strategies.

Principle 15 Strategies

- Since everyone shares the responsibility for character education, every school system employee and volunteer should receive the newsletter.
- Maximize readership by publishing the newsletter on the district's Web site.
- Produce the newsletters in such a way that each year's newsletters can be compiled and used as a reference volume.
- Include articles that principals can easily adapt for their school newsletters.
- Include in each newsletter a section celebrating at least one elementary, one middle, and one high school. Specific strategies used at the school level or achievements of the school should be presented for other schools to use as models.
- The newsletters should highlight upcoming character education conferences and workshops; available character education resources (Web sites, books, articles); best practices from around the nation; and local businesses that contribute to the character education initiative.
- Provide in the newsletter a collection of service-learning opportunities in the community.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 16

Partnerships with businesses and community organizations support character activities and expand character development into the community.

Effective character education engages community members as partners in the character-building effort. Businesses, chambers of commerce, religious institutions, youth organizations, and the immediate community play a pivotal role in the ethical upbringing of children. As stakeholders in the health and success of communities, businesses and other organizations support initiatives that strengthen the character of youths—their future employees, neighbors, and, in some cases, family members. With this in mind,

creating an environment where healthy relationships can form among businesses, community organizations, and the school community is vital.

The Council for Corporate and School Sponsorships (CCSS) serves as a national forum for the exchange of information, expertise, and ideas to ensure that partnerships

between businesses and schools

achieve their full potential. In a 2001

survey, CCSS found 70 percent of all

school districts engaged in some form

of business partnership. The

contribution to schools is substantial—

an estimated \$2.4 billion and 109 million volunteer hours. Districts

must help schools harness the power of such partnerships to advance character education in schools.

When character education is tied into these partnerships, districts and schools create powerful mechanisms for promoting good character.

While schools must make the effort to reach out to businesses in their communities, the district must support and supplement school efforts. Encouraging schools, providing staff development, and initiating contacts and partnerships with districtwide businesses and organizations—these are just some of the ways districts support corporate-school partnerships. When character education is tied into these partnerships, districts and schools create powerful mechanisms for promoting good character.

Principle 16 Strategies

- Establish a districtwide goal for all schools to increase their business partnerships, and focus on establishing relationships that will help the schools and communities facilitate the social and ethical development of all stakeholders.
- Identify a district-level staff member to serve as the school's liaison, sharing ideas and providing support.
- Designate a district-based business contact. He/she should inventory the businesses and organizations in the district and initiate contact with them. Also, the contact should identify and reach out to parents who own businesses.

- Work with the area's chamber of commerce, which provides access to community businesses large and small. The district should consider joining the chamber of commerce and appointing a district representative to attend meetings and serve on education-related committees.
- Ask businesses to support character education activities districtwide. Support comes in many forms, such as monetary contributions, volunteer hours, and speakers for a character-related speakers bureau.
- Be prepared when attending chamber of commerce meetings, individual business meetings, and related events. Come ready to talk about the districtwide and school character education initiatives. Bring handouts, have suggestions for how businesses can be involved, and remember to share your business card.
- Encourage schools to watch for the opening of new businesses and welcome them. (Consider bringing student-created artwork as a welcome gift when asking for a business's support. Most appreciate the students' involvement and are eager to display the artwork, as it motivates area families to patronize the business.)
- Communicate regularly with partners. Consider using a monthly newsletter and a page on the district Web site to share the character traits being emphasized and to promote upcoming events. Encourage schools to do the same. In the communication, encourage businesses to get involved. (The exposure the businesses receive is an important motivator for them to continue the partnership.)
- In the district building, create an area to recognize corporate and organizational partnerships. Encourage schools to do the same.
- Recognize business partners and encourage schools to do so as well. Whether it is a special event or a certificate of appreciation, let business partners know their contributions are appreciated and are helping children.

- Encourage schools to conduct business outreach on a local level: Engage businesses, join the local chamber of commerce, welcome new businesses, be prepared with information, ask for support for character activities (assemblies, recognition ceremonies, etc.), communicate regularly with partners, and recognize partners' efforts in the school and with special certificates or events.
- Invite a business stakeholder to serve on the districtwide character education committee. Encourage schools to invite local business representatives to serve on the character committee or planning team.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 17

Visual character displays represent a clear direction of the district initiative.

Character education should be given the same attention and concern as academics and athletics. To paraphrase Dr. Philip Vincent: For the central office character education leader or facilitator, character education is not another thing on the plate of the educator, it is the plate on which all else is laid. In order to communicate the importance of this effort, district offices should construct visual displays that highlight character education's pivotal role in the education of the child. Most district offices focus only on recognizing academics, arts, and athletics. However, when an individual walks into any district building, it should be evident that the district's mission reflects and supports the character education process. A district that visibly displays a mission statement supporting the character education process is a district that is committed to developing the total individual. The need for visual displays extends to the district's Web site, which should reinforce the character initiative and provide information on the district's commitment and process for character education.

When an individual walks into any district building, it should be evident that the district's mission reflects and supports the character education process.

Principle 17 Strategies

- Create a character education bulletin board or showcase that honors school programs and/or individual achievements.
- Revise the district policy handbook to include a section on expectations for appropriate social and ethical behaviors, just as it defines expectations for attendance, discipline, and academics.
- Periodically recognize stakeholders (school staff, students, community members, business representatives, etc.) for their achievements in the character education process.
- Create a character education section on the district Web site. This section should include a character trait to be emphasized, upcoming events, and recognition of accomplishments and partnerships.
- On the district and school marquees, display the character trait for the month and/or a thought-provoking quote relevant to the trait.
- Communicate messages from the district superintendent, on the Web or in newsletters, that reflect on the district's character education process or recognize a particular school or person's efforts to promote good character.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 18

The district recognizes schools with exemplary character education initiatives.

A school's character education initiative is always a work in progress. As research continues to expand the field of character education,

Schools that are staying abreast of current research and making gains in the social and ethical development of their students deserve to be recognized by the district.

schools should strive to implement strategies that are research-based and show promise in facilitating the character development of all stakeholders in the building. Schools that are staying abreast of current research and making gains in the

social and ethical development of their students deserve to be recognized by the district. This recognition can serve as reinforcement as well as a teaching tool. For the school being recognized, the reinforcement shows school stakeholders that others in the community appreciate their efforts. For other schools in the district, the exemplary character education initiatives serve as inspiration and models of success.

Principle 18 Strategies

- Highlight schools with exemplary initiatives in the district's character education newsletter.
- Hold an award ceremony for exemplary character education initiatives. The ceremony should be held annually and recognize not only schools, but community members, students, and local businesses.
- Highlight schools with exemplary character education initiatives at monthly board of education meetings.
- Work with local media to place stories about schools with exemplary character education initiatives.
- Have "share time," where schools that have been recognized for their efforts may share their successes with others. Participating schools should prepare handouts that clearly describe their efforts and the steps they took to build their programs. The district can provide ample space, time, and, if necessary, printing support for each school to tell its story.
- Feature schools with exemplary character education initiatives on the district Web site. Include sections for both recognition and best practices.
- Be sure to recognize schools that have challenging populations and/or conditions. This might include recognizing schools that are making good progress, even if they haven't yet met their goals.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 19

Periodic infusions of new strategies revitalize the character education initiative.

Anything worth doing is worth doing well. The same applies in the strategies we use to enhance the character development of all stakeholders within our school district. What is important to note is that what works for elementary students will not necessarily work for

Therefore, although we should build on common ground and maintain what is working well, we must also seek new strategies to keep the character initiative vital.

middle or high school students. The same applies for high school students. What works in a high school may not work with elementary students. The developmental needs of students will direct our best practices. Just as we take into consideration the developmental needs of students, we must also consider how we might “change it up”

regarding the strategies we use with students. Repetition and routine, although valuable in many aspects of life, can also result in boredom or a lack of interest in other areas. Kids as well as adults can get bored if the same practices and educational strategies are used day in and day out. Therefore, although we should build on common ground and maintain what is working well, we should also seek new strategies to keep the character initiative vital.

Principle 19 Strategies

- Involve new staff members in the initiative at the central office level. New people bring with them new ideas and a fresh perspective.
- Create opportunities for school staffs to share their ideas and experiences.
- Make the district and school character education committee meetings open to all staff members, and encourage new teachers and other employees to participate.
- Attend local, state, and national events to learn new strategies.

- Consider reading journals that focus on social and ethical development issues. Share these findings with other colleagues.
- Curriculum changes constantly. Therefore, the effort to make character education connections to the curriculum is ongoing. Consider forming a committee whenever a new textbook adoption is forthcoming. Have this committee examine potential texts and pick those that align closest with the academic and character-building standards of the school district.
- Business community involvement provides an opportunity to review a character education initiative. Ask business members to talk with students about how character traits developed in youth are crucial through adulthood and are displayed in occupations.
- Allow stakeholders the opportunity to verify and modify the character education initiatives. They must assess the extent to which the programs and activities have met the goals, mission, and expectations. Conduct meetings several times a year to encourage growth. The character education team/committee lead should be open to suggestions and be able to make changes.
- Support communication and collaboration among schools and other districts; both are key to enhancing existing initiatives and gathering fresh strategies.
- Monthly correspondence through a district or state liaison would give schools fresh ideas to blend into their programs throughout the year.
- At the district and school levels, celebrate student and staff successes publicly and often. Celebrations generate excitement throughout schools, homes, and communities. This enthusiasm helps motivate staff and stakeholders to create new strategies.
- Encourage schools with exemplary programs to apply for local, state, and national awards. This application process helps schools to review and revitalize their initiatives.



DISTRICT PRINCIPLE 20

District public relations and news coverage highlight the character education initiative.

When parents, schools, and communities are on the same page, working together to build character, the results for students and adults can be life-changing. But a community must first learn about the character education initiative before it can support schools and

The campaign to inform communities begins by creating awareness of character education's value in improving life for everyone, young and old alike.

be involved in district and school efforts. The campaign to inform communities begins by creating awareness of character education's value in improving life for everyone, young and old alike. A continual flow of information is also vital to keeping character efforts fresh and growing.

As successes are realized, districts and schools should recognize and celebrate them, enlisting the media to share the good news. Communicating positive messages and stories to the community through the media and through public relations materials serves both to inspire and to teach the value of character education. Recognition and celebration are also crucial to motivating all of the stakeholders involved in the character education effort. The glue of a community is the positive relationships of its people. These relationships are nurtured by the good actions of community members for one another; communicating these actions helps to strengthen the community.

The district must take a leadership role in engaging the media and producing public relations materials that educate about character education and promote districtwide and school-specific events and successes. The district should also work with schools to help them understand basic public relations, when and how to engage the media to promote good news in the schools' communities, and other methods of communicating the character initiative to the community.

Principle 20 Strategies

- Facilitate schools' efforts to write and distribute stakeholder materials, such as newsletters, that highlight character education progress and successes.
- Encourage schools to recognize staff and students during the school announcements.
- Hold celebrations to recognize character education efforts at the school, district, and community levels.
- Work with the media and individual schools to place positive stories about character development in community newspapers and local publications.
- Build community partnerships that support a public relations effort, such as radio public service announcements, messages displayed on public transportation vehicles, and character education broadcasts on local television and cable channels.
- Designate a week for character education recognition events to increase public awareness and to celebrate accomplishments.
- Recognize staff at all levels of the district's operation. The district and each school building become models of character recognition not only for students but also for adults.
- Encourage students and other school stakeholders to recognize community groups that perform various services for others.
- Encourage students and other stakeholders to write letters to the editor recognizing the efforts of public service employees.

Reference

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